

The Benefits for India of a US-2 Deal with Japan

Acquiring the amphibious aircraft could facilitate a positive policy shift for Delhi.

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In defiance of its longstanding policy, Japan has offered to sell India its ShinMaywa US-2 amphibious aircraft. In May this year, during a four-day visit to Tokyo by Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, the two countries agreed on talks that would confirm plans for India to purchase the US-2, an aircraft developed in Japan for use by its Self-Defense Forces. It is expected that India could buy up to 15 of the aircraft, if not more, in what would be a redefining of defense relations between two Asian heavyweights.

The deal marks a volte-face from Japan's strict postwar policy of not supplying any defense equipment to other countries. Japan imposed a ban on arms exports in 1967, as it sought to demonstrate its antiwar credentials. The ban began to come under pressure in 2011, when the Japanese government relaxed the rules to allow Japanese firms to take part in multinational weapons and military projects.

There are two key driving forces behind this fundamental shift in Japanese policy. One of course is the rise of China and its tussles with Japan over territorial issues. The other is Japan's desire to expand the market for its defense industries. The two factors are linked: apart from India being a significant and growing defense market, Tokyo also finds it shares common cause with Delhi in the security realm.

Going beyond the mere novelty of it, Japan's latest offer to sell its US-2 aircraft to India is important because of the extent to which it would redefine the power equations, partnerships and collaborations in Asia. If the sale were to form the basis of similar future cooperation between India and Japan, it would have the potential to influence the balance of power in the Indo-Pacific. The deal would not only strengthen ties between Japan and India but would pave the way for future cooperation in the Indo-Pacific region.

The US-2 is a military aircraft, but it can be retrofitted for civilian use. Even if Japan sells the aircraft to India for civilian use only, India would have the option to rework the aircraft to restore its military purpose. Given the importance Japan is now attaching to its relations with India, one might expect that Tokyo would be quite happy to leave Delhi with that option of converting from civilian to military use.

Japan has already signaled its interest in working together with India in the Indian Ocean. The US-2 deal could facilitate that. Increasing defense cooperation with Japan would not necessarily initiate an arms race in the Indo-Pacific, as suggested by China. In fact, the Indian Ocean is already highly militarized. One

more military or civilian deal is not going to throw the ocean or its littoral and island states into chaos.

Moreover, the US-2's features also count as reasons why India should go ahead with the deal. The aircraft's short takeoff capability and its ability to land on tides as high as three meters would be a boon for a country as exposed to the ocean's whims as India is.

Apart from this, the deal will give India a flexibility boost insofar as it will add a new country to the list of potential defense suppliers. An East Asian dimension to India's defense imports, hitherto dominated by the Western powers, will not only provide Delhi with an additional option, but will extend its Look-East Policy to the Far East. In recent years, India has been taking steps to refurbish this policy by working vigorously with its East Asian neighbors. More often than not, however, this revamping effort is checked by China, which can take advantage of India's policy of conflict avoidance. The South China Sea is a case in point. India's desire to work with Vietnam in Phu Khanh and Nha Trang has frequently stumbled on Chinese resistance.

A US-2 deal would enable Delhi to bolster its Far East ties with less chance of rattling Beijing. More than that, though, it could be a cornerstone of a more confident Indian policy in the region.

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